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Remembering to say 'Thank You'

Psalm 103:1-5, 8-12; Luke 17:11-18

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What do we say? I am sure that I'm not alone in having had a mother who rather consistently gave loud stage directions to me and my four brothers throughout our early childhood. For example, coming to dinner, she would characteristically ask, 'Have you washed your hands?' Or, if Aunt Pauline, or someone else, offered me a sweet, like a cookie, and before I could summon up a reply of my very own, Mother would automatically jump in with her persistent question, 'What do you say?' The answer, of course, had to be obvious.

Jesus was met by ten lepers who sought his pity. They saw in him one who had a sensitive and compassionate nature. He told them, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests.' And they consequently were healed. All ten of them were physically healed. But then one of them, who happened to be a Samaritan, returned to Jesus, praising God and thanking Jesus for what had been done for him. The other nine? If they'd had a mother like mine, they would have been there with him. Jesus commends the one, who not only experienced physical well-being that day, but experienced spiritual healing as well.

Here we have two typical responses to the experienced grace of God. One is the response of gratitude that springs from deep within the heart, an overwhelming awareness of God's loving nature. The other is a response that really is a non-response; a response that sort of takes God for granted, for it's his job to be loving. It's his job to reach out with compassion. It's his job to answer prayers. To be there when we need him. The one has been made aware of the *awesomeness* of the Almighty. The others have somehow been trapped by their own self-awareness, and went on their way, glad of their own good fortune.

I want us this morning to focus on the subject of 'praise.' Our older versions of the Bible use the word 'bless' in the 103rd Psalm. They are the same word in Hebrew, the word *barak.* The word has a meaning that suggests a profound involvement of the entire self. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!'

We use the word 'bless' in a variety of ways, usually rather casually. 'God bless you,' we may say when someone sneezes. Or, 'bless my soul and body,' not necessarily an expression of extreme self-centeredness. If my father had misplaced something, or it suddenly slipped out of his fingers, he might have referred to it as 'that blessed thing.' Needless to say, he certainly wasn't blessing it!

In our childhood prayers many of us were taught to pray, 'God bless Mommy and Daddy,' and if we had expansive hearts and willing minds, we might have been gracious enough to include our siblings as well. But *bless* God? To our way of thinking, it is God who blesses *us.* Well, David the King of Israel had good reason to bless God, for God had again and again intervened in his life whenever he was trapped in desperate situations. In his experience of calling upon God and experiencing divine Grace,

David saturated himself with a sense of the over-arching presence of the Lord. He could with genuine enthusiasm cry out, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul,' or as a modern translation puts it, 'Praise the Lord!' But that isn't where we are most of the time, is it. We identify ourselves most often as being on the receiving end of things, not the giving end. God blesses us. We are the recipients of blessing.

Let's go back for a moment to that Hebrew word, *barak.* When the Bible was translated from Hebrew into Greek the word *eulogia* was used, which in English means 'to bless,' or 'to praise.' But there is an important clue in the Greek word, for from it we get our English word *'euologize,'* which means to 'speak well of,' 'to verbally praise.' Unfortunately most of the time we wait until a person is dead and gone before we eulogize them.

I spent twenty years of my life as a marriage counselor. Often, in conversation with a couple, one would say something like, 'Oh, I don't *need* to tell her that I appreciate and love her, she knows...' But how much nicer when such thoughts are articulated in speech.

God wants to hear that we love him. God wants us to give voice to our praise. He wants us to *eulogize* him.

Carl was a sad little boy about ten years old. He was failing in school. Nothing seemed to cheer him up. He was very depressed. Carl was one of a dozen elementary school boys of single moms that I was asked to help. I was an inner city missionary working on behalf of a large downtown church in Atlanta, and assigned to work with the local school.

As I reached out to Carl he slowly began to thaw. Distrusting at first, with no smile, he had to test my sincerity. When he learned that I would be there for him every Monday he began to respond. He really missed having a daddy. I couldn't be a daddy to him, but I could be his friend.

Our friendship grew, and as I listened to him think out and talk about his problems, of his struggles with day-to-day life, he slowly began to take a renwed interest in his classwork. His grades improved. He became more responsible. He began to attend church. I worked with Carl and the other eleven boys over a span of two years.

The time eventually came when my seminary education came to an end, and I had to say goodbye to each of them. Gloria, Melissa and I moved here to California. I was ordained, called to a congregation, and fell into the routine of a series of parish ministries. Years passed. Then one day I received a letter. The envelope was grubby. It had been sent to my first California address, and then forwarded twice. The envelope was covered with instructions and stamps. I tore it open. It was from Carl, and I should have kept it.

He was a senior in college, president of his student body. He was active in his church youth group and about ready to step into his life's career. In beautifully crafted words the young man wrote out his grateful thanks to me for the encouragement I had given him which allowed him to get his life turned around in the right direction. He just had to thank me. Like the leper that returned to Jesus, Carl was the only one of the twelve who went out of his way to *eulogize* me for what I had done for him.

Humbled, of course I praised God for what he had done in that young man's life. Carl would now be nearing sixty, and I trust that he has continued in faithful discipleship and service. I've been fortunate in having several other such experiences, each

one praising, and calling forth praise. Eulogies, given in life.

Each one here, if you take the time to think about it, can reflect upon experiences that merit the praise and blessing of God. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, 'Blessed be God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion, the God of all comfort.' Paul needed that kind of God in his ministry in Corinth. And to the Ephesian Christians he wrote, 'Blessed be God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.' I'm sure he was thinking warmly of blessings like love, joy, and peace.

Peter the Apostle wrote to the churches, 'Blessed be God, father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for in his great mercy he has given us new birth, into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.' --And as we go through the Bible, the momentum builds. Jude, the Lord's brother, penned this beautiful benediction: 'To him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior be praise, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now, and forevermore.'

The Apocalypse itself, fearful and strange book as it may seem, lifts its voice in crescendoes of praise: 'To him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, to him be praise and power for ever and ever.' And further, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive blessing and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.' And more: 'To him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be praise and honor and blessing and power, for ever and ever.'

So, friends, bless God. Eulogize him with your hearts. Be like the one, and not like the nine. In the Apocalypse there is this last final word. The Lord's agnels cry out, 'Praise God! All you his servants, who fear him, both small and great.' And the great company shouts in return, 'Halleljia! for our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him praise!' Now that is *real* worship. That's what worship is about. Once a week we come together, corporately, to bless God. We take the time to focus on what God has done for us. As glad as we are to be with each other, we are really here to join together in blessing him. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul!'

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